



What to Do about a Negative Performance Review

Your annual review is your time to shine, even when some of the feedback is negative! The review process offers you the opportunity to look back at your accomplishments and set goals for the year to come. But how do you handle a review that takes a turn for the worse? How can you save the situation when you're ready to crawl—or storm—out of that office because you and your manager don't see eye to eye about your contributions to the company over the past year?

Putting the Review in Perspective

Just how serious were the negative points brought up in your review? Serious enough to put your job in jeopardy? Or can you look at them as points to keep in mind and observations to get you back on track for the coming year? Being judged or appraised is, by its very nature, stressful. And remember, no matter how well you perform, a skilled manager will look for points for improvement. If there was nothing more to learn or improve upon, you might feel relieved, but you would not benefit from the performance review. Take the comments in stride.

Ask for Clarification

If you don't agree with what's been pointed out in your review, ask for clarification. "You've said that I don't always use good judgment. Could you give me an example? I'd really like to learn from this." Turn the review into an opportunity for improvement. Of *course* you feel disappointed and you may even feel angry. However, resist the urge to become emotional. If you calmly ask for clarification, your boss will probably appreciate having the opportunity to explain. He or she will also know that you are taking these comments seriously.

Keep Emotions Under Control

Try to not take comments personally. They should be about your job performance and that is what you have to address. Also, avoid venting with coworkers, which could just make the situation worse. If you have to let off steam, do it when you get home. Mow the lawn or take a brisk walk. If you decide on a written response to be put in your file, go over it carefully to be sure that you are using a professional, objective tone that presents yourself in the best light. Remember to treat your manager with respect. This should not be about personalities. Your review and any response should be about job performance.

Exercise Your Options

If you know that your performance fell a notch during the past year, the best approach is to be the first one to mention it. Recruit the person you report to as your ally. After all, your manager is the "expert" who's responsible for your review. Make sure that you understand what your boss expects so you meet those expectations. If the criticism really catches you by surprise, you need to know more about it so that you can keep on track. Set yourself up for success with a positive response.

Revisit the Scene of the Crime

Sometimes you can be so stunned when a review turns into what you feel is a tallying of your shortcomings that you may not be ready to turn the experience into something positive at that moment. Remain calm. After you've given the review some thought, consider what you want to say. What points do you want to make or clarify with your manager? Plan your discussion. Write out your comments and go over them at home. Ask for an appointment. Make this post-review conference a win-win situation by coming to an agreement on common expectations for the coming year. A negative review can be a vehicle for career growth if you view the process as a valuable tool in understanding and developing skills that will be recognized on the job.

Alignment of Expectations

If you feel that an observation is grossly unfair, many companies allow you to write a response for your personnel file. In this case, be sure to couch your response in objective language. Do not turn your remarks into a personal assault on an "unfair manager." That approach certainly won't help your cause. Simply explain the situation as you experienced it. "Although Mrs. Harris feels that my tardiness has been excessive, I had written a letter about my wife's illness, and I felt my reasons for coming in late were understood." On the other hand, if you feel that your boss has a valid point, take the position of the team player. What changes can you make to bring your performance into line? After all, you still want to remain on this team!

What the EAP Can Do

The EAP can help you identify the steps to improve your performance, help you find hope to succeed, and energy to take on the challenges.